

The Omnipotent or the Headstrong?

President's Intense Commitment Leads to Creation of Double Image

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Shortly before a wintry dawn in late 1963, Larry O'Brien wearily placed a call to the bedroom of President Johnson to tell him of a disastrous foreign aid vote.

"When did they vote?" asked the President.

"At 4:15 in the morning," replied his chief congressional trouble-shooter.

"Why didn't you call me?" the President softly remonstrated. "I know you've been up all night bleeding. But I want to bleed along with you."

Gulliver in Washington

This is the way of the Johnson Presidency. It is "total immersion," as one White House staff member puts it, in the office that Lyndon Johnson has now presided over for more than half the span of time allowed John F. Kennedy.

His intense commitment has

given birth to the notion of President Johnson as a tireless colossus who has reduced the rest of Washington to microscopic scale.

It springs from far within the man, a man who is up by 6:30 a.m. with piles of official papers at his bedside, who moves through his 18-hour day at the pace of a Texas twister, who bulks over the "bully pulpit" of the Presidency—exhorting, cajoling, blistering and bargaining—as no man has since Theodore Roosevelt.

The style is reflected in the streams of outgoing calls that keep the White House switchboard humming: "Get me Rabinovich . . . Get me Rusk . . . Get me Bundy . . . Get me the Situation Room."

An early indication of the LBJ Presidential technique were the two portraits of the President, magnified to a scale that would make a Pharaoh blush, which looked down upon the Democratic convention delegates who had come to nominate him last year in a preordained rite of acclamation. It was evidenced more recently during last week's impromptu news conference when the President suddenly "declassified" part of an intelligence document and went on to scoop his Labor Department with its own unemployment figures.

Almost inevitably, a myth of "Lyndon the Omnipotent" has grown up around the President, built in part on his own political artifices but in larger measure a result of his successes in marshaling the Great Society programs through Congress. The myth is concocted of corn, consensus and unexampled achievement.

Cranial Craftiness

But another conception of the President, of "Lyndon the Headstrong," is gaining currency in American intellectual circles and abroad. This new stereotype pictures the President as a fast-drawing cowboy who is impatient with the complexities of a world sundered by the forces of nation-

alism, revolution and big-power policies.

This buzz of criticism seems faint when compared with the overwhelming evidence of support for the President's policies, as measured by the well-thumbed packets of polls in his pocket. But there is a persisting theme to the criticism: that he is overplaying his power and overinvolving himself in the details of Governmental decision-making, that the Johnson Administration is a one-man band.

Grumbling Abroad

There are disconsolate mutters (and at this stage only mutters) on Capitol Hill that the White House has trampled with needless harshness on parliamentary rights in its zeal to get its big program through, such as Appalachia and aid to education. "The arguments that the bill would have been lost otherwise is pure baloney," complained one veteran House Democrat, speaking of the hastily propelled education bill. "This has been the most disorderly debate and outrageous flouting of Democratic procedure I have seen in nearly 20 years."

There is grumbling in foreign capitals that the President has not consulted with them on such crucial decisions as the bombing of North Vietnam and the intervention in Santo Domingo. "We're expected to do chores for you in Hanoi," said one widely respected European observer,

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Mr. and Mrs. Johnson hear Administration plans - praised in Austin, Tex., church services.

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'and yet our Government is not informed of major policy decisions until after they are carried out.'

Even within the upper echelons of Government policy-makers there are discreet complaints at the degree of the President's involvement in operational details, such as the all-night White House sessions during the peak of the Dominican crisis. Mr. Johnson presided over staffs of hollow-eyed subordinates with the boisterous energy of a top sergeant.

Lyndon Johnson is surrounded by one of the most protective staffs that ever filed into the White House. But how can you muffle Vesuvius with an awning? If his credits are Texas-sized, the mistakes are also bound to be whoppers.

A Reedy in the Wind

The plight of the Johnson staff is embodied in no one so vividly as in George E. Reedy, an intelligent, warm and deeply well-intentioned man. But Reedy might just as well be the custodian of a hurricane as try to keep newsmen posted regularly and precisely on the activities, intentions or even whereabouts of Lyndon Johnson.

Reedy's most singular contribution to the White House of Lyndon Johnson is a character now known as "The Prudent Man." He is a reporter who brings a packed suitcase to the White House in the face of every indication that the President will spend the week-end here in town rather than Texas. The Prudent Man trims his lunch hour despite the assurance of an official news "lid"—the announcement that nothing will be doing for a while. He is a man, not unlike Reedy himself, who lives in constant expectancy of the unexpected from Lyndon Johnson. The Prudent Man is, understandably, a bit of a grouch.

Reedy's uncertainty about the vagaries of the Presidential agenda sometimes rankle newsmen, for whom he is the most accessible target. The President in turn resents the often sharp questioning inflicted on his press secretary. In the privacy of his office the President has, on occasions, mimicked the reporters' questions in a high-pitched, querulous tone. When reciting Reedy's answers, his voice became booming Delphic.

The truth is that the Presi-

dent is his own chief pitchman and he will delegate the job to no one.

He cannot endure to be scooped by government agencies on even the most prosaic wage, price or unemployment figure — so long as it is good news — and he often prefaces a news conference with a torrent of statistics that would make the lowliest agency information man yawn.

The realities of how the White House operates under Lyndon Johnson are as complex and unyielding to generalization as the man who runs it.

The President's treatment of his personal staff is a perplexing blend of imperiousness and devotion.

On one occasion he dropped into the press office unexpectedly and glanced at the desk of then assistant press secretary Malcolm Kilduff. "Kilduff," barked the President, "I hope your mind isn't as cluttered as your desk." Several weeks later he stopped in again, took a look at the immaculately bare surface of the desk and snapped: "Kilduff, I hope your brain isn't as vacant as your desk."

A visitor to the President's ranch was present when Mr. Johnson picked up the telephone and blistered Reedy in language he said "I've never heard one man use on another." After the President hung up, he turned to a guest and said, "Well, let's give George his Christmas present."

The Complex Man

When the guest expressed surprise at the sudden change in the Presidential temper, Mr. Johnson explained: "You never want to give a man a present when he's up—you want to do it when he's down."

Reedy executed a letter of resignation to Mr. Johnson after a particularly scorching Presidential rebuke following last year's Democratic convention. The press secretary started forlornly back to Washington from Texas. He got as far as Dallas when word reached the President and Reedy was summoned back.

By contrast, after the morals arrest last October of Mr. Johnson's top staff assistant, Walter W. Jenkins, who cracked under the pressure of overwork, the President stuck loyally by him during the ordeal of public disgrace.

"He's thoughtless and

thoughtful, cruel and compassionate, simple and immensely complicated. I don't know anyone who doesn't feel ambivalently about him," said one who has watched the President at close range. "Like all great men, he is capable of great pettiness," said another who weathered the storms of Johnsonian anger and whose admiration survived.

One of the President's most perceptive friends insists that the seeming capriciousness and constant fracture of routine is what enables Mr. John-

son to remain the master rather than the slave of the Presidency. "The great leaders of our system," he said, "have operated with the appearance of unreasonableness. The purely rational politician can be anticipated too easily. But the President is also a very deliberate and reflective man—otherwise he would have been out of business long ago."

Of course there were times when the tearing up of an agenda or a sudden detour from the traditional path of protocol has brought a fallout of outraged foreign sensibilities on the White House, such as the cancellation of the visits to the United States of Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistan's President Mohammed Ayub Khan.

The White House threw the arrangers of the United Nations anniversary celebration into a spasm of panic when it announced Wednesday that the President would speak at Friday's opening meeting rather than Saturday's closing session, as had been planned. This peremptory switch of signals required a last-minute rescheduling and rewriting of the speeches of the 26 U.N. representatives, as well as the jinking of more than a ton of prepared texts.

Surprise Package

Surprise has often been an ingredient of President Johnson's foreign policy initiatives. Last May 2, on no more than an hour's notice, he walked into the White House television studio and delivered a major speech on the Dominican crisis. It was the talk in which he declared, for the first time, that Communists were in control of the Caribbean revolution. The speech was widely interpreted as enunciating a new Johnson Doctrine for the Western Hemisphere, although the

President rejected this view.

He delivered it at 10 p.m., barely in time for late editions of the next morning's papers and for transmission to the Latin American audiences for whom the speech was presumably intended. The White House had requested no television time, although the networks were free to film it if they wished. (Early the following week a group of network executives called at the White House to appeal for more advance notice.)

Did it happen this way by premeditation? The evidence suggests that it did not. Unknown to the sprinkling of newsmen drawn to the White House that Sunday by a routine Presidential meeting with Congressional leaders, Mr. Johnson had also invited in a group of friends. He went over with them the arguments, the latest evidence and the criticisms that were emerging from the Dominican crisis. "As he warmed up, he got better and better," recalled one of the President's guests. If White House aides had any advance inkling of the significance of what the President would say that Sunday night, they betrayed no awareness of it.

Impulsive but Informed

Although Mr. Johnson's penchant for the unexpected sometimes earns him the charge of impulsiveness, it is unlikely that any American Chief Executive has been more completely briefed or so completely up on his homework. At night, and again in the morning, he devours inches-high stacks of "bedtime reading" — intelligence reports, staff memoranda and raw cables.

"A man's judgment is no better than his information," Mr. Johnson preaches endlessly to his staff. "He bleeds out every shred of information you have," says one top staff member. The President's interest in detail is all-encompassing, from the next target in North Viet-Nam to the next police chief in the District of Columbia.

The sponge-like quality of his mind shows off to best advantage in small audiences. When the President talks of Viet-Nam on the political pulpit he tends to do so in sweeping language that tempts listeners to conclude he is oversimplifying the realities. But

in a private setting he expounds his position with a power and subtlety that can awe his most sophisticated listeners.

Nothing brings the blood to the head faster in the higher circles of the White House than invidious comparisons between the conduct of foreign policy under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

For one thing, Johnson men are quick to point out that the President has retained Mr. Kennedy's top policy team — McGeorge Bundy, Robert S. McNamara and Dean Rusk.

They also say that "with all due respect to John Kennedy, we haven't had a Bay of Pigs."

The vocabulary of diplomacy that is heard in some White House quarters has a muscular and pragmatic ring, reflective of the President's own cast of mind. "When Castro threatened to turn the water off at Guantanamo," related one high Presidential aide, "some of the White House advisers wanted to hunker down and settle. But



some of us wanted to bristle up. The President listened to all the arguments, he looked down the long road and came to the decision by himself. We manufactured our own water, denuded the base of Cubans and kicked Castro in the back with a five million dollar foreign-exchange loss."

The public Lyndon Johnson welcomes debate over his foreign policies even though, as he recently put it, "men are dying to preserve our freedom" while the critics are talking. But in private confrontation with Senate critics from his own Party the President can be as stately as a Texas ranger closing in on a hapless rustler.

How does Senator X expect him to run the war in Vietnam while he is being shot at from behind, the President wants to know. Doesn't Senator X realize that his arguments on the floor are being quoted in Peking and Moscow? How can the President get the other side to the bargaining table if Senator X keeps saying we're ready to cut and run?

The President impatiently exclaims that he doesn't want

to hear about Asian history or ancient mistakes. He says he has a big pile of papers in his desk that Mike Mansfield gave him about history. "I'm concerned about what we do now!" Mr. Johnson lectures his critics.

This "treatment" can go on at excruciating lengths. When it is all over the dissident staggers exhausted and emotionally battered from the White House. "It's a very unpleasant experience," ruefully recalled one recipient.

Mr. Johnson uses the pulpit, with equal adeptness, to charm as well as to chastise and expound. During the height of racial violence in Selma, Ala., last March he called in a group of clergymen who had come to Washington to protest his inaction.

For more than two hours the President spoke of his commitment to the cause of equal rights from the days since he was a young teacher in a segregated Mexican school. By the time the clergymen emerged some were moist-eyed and all were convinced of the President's devotion to the cause. When they tried to tell their associ-

Conference

President Johnson is in deep conference with Sen. Mike Mansfield (D-Wyo.), the Democratic Majority Leader, and Sen. Everett M. Dirksen (R-Ill.), Republican Minority Leader, as they leave a White House room after a briefing of the press.

ates, who had been outside the gates, there were cries of "sell-out."

Nevertheless Mr. Johnson's constant accessibility to both sides in the civil rights battle, his Southernbred understanding of the issue and the shrewdness of his leadership appear to have banked the racial fires this year after two long summers of discontent. This too is one of the fruits of "total immersion" in the office.

John Kennedy used to escape the crushing pressures of the Presidency by slipping away for dinner with his friends and an evening of deliberately shopless talk. President Eisenhower would escape to the serene and simple world of the golf links. But Lyndon Johnson's public and private worlds are centered wholly on the office.

He seems to want to savor and suffer its every minute.